Evangelicals and Earth Day; Bridging Christians and environmentalists

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Body

Today and this weekend, we celebrate the 35th anniversary of Earth Day. This year, all living things around the planet have a new ally: evangelical Christians. What will this partner be like? Will evangelicals collaborate with traditionally secular environmentalists? Will they celebrate Earth Day?

Evangelicals have rediscovered the biblical mandate to care for creation, but will they go on to tackle issues such as overpopulation and global economic injustices? Will they be hypocrites or leaders?

Before I explore those questions, it is only fair to tell you where I'm coming from. I believe that Jesus walked on water -- and not because he didn't know how to swim. I drive a hybrid car, live in a passive solar house and use one-quarter of the electricity and one-third of the fossil fuels that I did five years ago. These changes came about when I opened my heart and mind to what God has to say about environmentalism. Eventually I felt called to leave my work as an emergency-room doctor to focus on the most pressing health issue of all time: Earth care.

We evangelical Christians are beginning to acknowledge the plight of the planet. The Earth is ill. There are no elm trees left on Elm Street, no chestnut trees on Chestnut Lane, and soon, there will be no maple trees left on Maple Avenue. The clouds of birds that migrated in my youth are gone. Frogs are dying all over the globe. Hourly, farmlands are being planted with malls and subdivisions and fertilized by suburban sprawl. Our industrial way of life is literally giving the Earth a fever. As ancient polar ice caps and mountain glaciers melt, we are increasingly pummeled by severe weather. Climatologists long ago predicted the changes that are now happening; we do not need another study to restate what the facts have shown us. It is time to act.

Those of us who take our Bible literally find that God not only made everything, but that he loves his creation, enjoys it and claims ownership of it. Yet for the past two centuries Christians and non-Christians alike have taken God's creation for granted -- or worse, saw it as something to be exploited. We are waking up to reality: The wages of sin are death.

We cannot claim to love God and not love what he loves. We will not get away with it. It is true that God gave us dominion over the Earth, but we must face the meaning of this mandate.

Controversy exists concerning the collaboration between evangelical Christians and environmentalists. Should it? Both act out of a desire to protect those plants and creatures that cannot speak for themselves. Both advocate for elements of life over which mankind exercises "dominion." These include the most mute and vulnerable of all creatures -- the generations yet to be born.

Thus, both groups are going about work prescribed by the Bible. Arguing about who gets to save the planet is like two passengers on a ship fighting over who should throw the life ring to the man who fell overboard. For the drowning man, it does not matter whether a Hindu, a pagan, an evangelical or an environmentalist makes the toss.

The Bible tells both evangelicals and environmentalists to work with any group concerned with saving the planet, and I believe serving God to save the planet will forge unusual alliances. In the Old Testament God uses non-believers such as the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to advance his plan. In the New Testament Jesus rewards the Roman Centurion for his faith, even though the Centurion is a pagan. When we are going about the Lord's work, we will find others there as well. Christians are under strict instructions not to judge our co-workers.

Should evangelical Christians celebrate Earth Day?

Yes!

Psalms 24 declares that the Earth is the Lord's and that all creatures belong to him. Jesus said that we are to be a light on a hill giving hope to the world. I have "preached" in churches and "lectured" in front of environmental groups. I find it an honor to be with non-Christian or secular groups and to serve as an ambassador for my faith. The call to action is one of love, hope and personal responsibility. It transcends pink state/blue state labels and artificial boundaries. I have found tolerance accorded me when I am talking about God's living word.

Among the most pressing dilemmas facing Earth is overcrowding. Before dismissing population control as a matter unworthy of Christian consideration, reflect on the following.

If we place all 10,000 years of human history (8000 B.C. to A.D. 2000) on a single calendar year, mankind goes from January through all 12 months of the year before reaching a census of 1 billion late on Dec. 24. One billion more people are added to the planet on Dec. 29, and then again on Dec. 30. We then add an astounding 3 billion to the population on Dec. 31. Start the next year's calendar, and we pick up our 7th billion at 11 a.m. on New Year's Day. When we accepted the life-prolonging fruits of science, we unbalanced the natural human population equation. All Christians -- all humans -- must face this explosive issue.

America is the third most populated country on the planet. According to our government, we will surge from our current 296 million to 600 million in only 70 years. To whom do we wish to delegate responsibility for the Earth's population? The Bible says that the wise man perceives danger and takes steps to avoid it, while the fool rushes toward peril without thought. Will evangelical environmentalists lead, or will we find ourselves mired in hypocrisy, materialism and finger pointing? I believe that we will lead, primarily because we can evoke the four-letter word "Love," which it taboo in medicine, politics, academia and environmentalism.

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Graphic

1 DRAWING; PHOTOBY: Paul Lachine

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